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SUBJECT: DANCING IN THE STREETS: SAUDI NATIONAL DAY REVEALS YOUTHFUL ENERGY, PATRIOTISM IN THE KINGDOM

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires David Rundell
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Saudi National Day was observed September 23 with unprecedented celebration in the Kingdom. Unlike previous years, which saw a more somber observance of the day, this year's anniversary of the unification of the Kingdom was a joyous display of nationalism, particularly among the youth population, and for the first time, young women. Only a few weeks earlier the Grand Mufti declared valid only the two Eid celebrations, discouraging all other holidays as un-Islamic. Many Saudis, some local publications, as well as blogs expressed surprise and delight at the fervor, while others lamented that the pace of reform remains slow. End summary.

Country's 78th anniversary, holiday's fourth

¶2. (C) National Day in Saudi Arabia is September 23, commemorating the unification of the country by King Abdul Aziz in 1932. For years the date was celebrated only by Saudi embassies abroad, which hosted national day events mirroring the standard practice of other embassies. However, in 2005 King Abdullah declared the date a national holiday to be celebrated domestically. This coincided both with the country's 75th anniversary and the year he acceded to power. Many Saudis have frowned on the celebration of national holidays since it allegedly divides the worldwide community of Muslims (ummah) and distracts believers from the two main Islamic feasts of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. The latter justification often has been cited to oppose celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, and foreign holidays. In fact, however, more Saudis have celebrated the new holiday with increasing fervor each year since 2005.

Remarkable public celebration in conservative capital includes Saudi women for the first time

¶3. (C) This year official observances were organized by municipalities throughout the country, but most noteworthy was the youth participation in the civic holiday. Only weeks after Saudi Grand Mufti Abdulaziz Al Sheikh declared any celebration apart from the two Eid holidays to be un-Islamic, Saudi citizens took to the streets in large numbers to demonstrate their patriotism (or at least have fun). Across the country, young men and women painted their cars and faces with the Saudi flag, and some even wore the flag as a cape draped across their backs. One observer in Riyadh said, "I have never seen anything like it, there were people on skates going up and down the street and cars honking, no one could even move. The youth are so thirsty for expression, for something to celebrate." While this kind of behavior happens occasionally in some other Arab capitals (e.g., after big soccer wins), the sight of Saudi female young adults riding up and down Riyadh's main thoroughfares with their faces

covered only in green paint was remarkable.

¶ 14. (C) A seemingly surprised Saudi community embraced the nationalistic enthusiasm. Mainstream publications, including the English Language Saudi Gazette and several Arabic language dailies published pictures and articles about the festivities. Many in the online community also commented favorably on personal blogs about the celebration. Nevertheless, some young liberal Saudis lamented publicly that life was not changing fast enough. The author of one site, Saudijeans.com, wrote: "the country is changing, but at a glacial pace that is leaving me and many others dejected and frustrated. It is just disheartening to move in slow baby steps when we can -- and should -- take leaps ahead to the future." Many of the talkback comments to this and similar posts expressed aligning views.

¶ 15. (C) Reportedly the Mutaween of the SAG Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVP) was deployed in force, but observers say they were unable to squelch the revelry. A few young men were arrested for breaking traffic rules and approximately 35 cars were impounded. The daily pan-Arab newspaper Al-Hayat reported September 25 that the CPVP prevented the Ha'il Literary Women's Club from hosting a children's event on the occasion of Saudi National Day in one of that town's commercial malls.

This is a good sign for this country

¶ 16. (C) Comment: The outpouring of youth and celebration,

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particularly by young women, was novel in 2008. In a country where nearly 70% of the population is under 30 years old, soaring nationalist pride among this age-group is a notably good sign for the country's future and for U.S. interests. For its part, the SAG is pouring billions of riyals (more than \$1 billion) into youth programs, particularly educational scholarships. However, patriotism may not account for all of the energetic displays on National Day. During the celebrations Arab News attempted to interview approximately 50 youths on the holiday's meaning. Many declined to comment, citing lack of knowledge of the history of the day, or confessing to believe that observation of a civic holiday contravenes Islamic traditions. End comment.
RUNDELL